

After Harry's Suicide

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I had not dreamed, so at first I remembered nothing. But that was only for the seconds it took between sleep and consciousness. The seconds between nothing and awareness. I lay on my back for a minute wondering why I was still fully dressed, on top of my bedspread, birds singing outside, hearing a television already on. Then I was fully awake and I remembered. I rolled over, buried my face into the pillow, and cried without enthusiasm. I felt like I might throw up. I stopped crying when the pillowcase became wet against my cheek, and I peered out over the white linen with my chin in its damp pocket.

On the table beside my bed was a photo of Harry in his letter jacket, his jaw cocked forward, his hands in his jeans pockets, his hair a mess, over his ears, onto his forehead, and behind him the woods, leafless bare trees, the black Dodge, and the spot where the cabin was to be with the two of us smoking pipes, sitting in rocking chairs, taking in the view. He was laughing at me as I posed him, ordered him to take a position with his foot on the bumper, which he refused to do. He teased me and told me to hurry up and then he laughed at me and that's when I caught him, in the moment when he'd stopped laughing, but was still smiling and I captured him full of life.

I held the picture against my belly, cried some more, and rocked over the cradled picture.

I thought about my parents telling me there was nothing I could do. Nothing to ease the pain. Only time. Time eases all pain. Heals all

pain. And I should pray. Pray for his soul. Even if he is not Catholic. At least he's Christian. Was.

Time. But what should I do as time passes? Submit to the pain? Endure?

Then I shall endure somewhere else. Somewhere where everything does not remind me. Of him. Of my pain. Of what I will never have. Again. Or ever.

I stopped crying, went to the bathroom, washed my face, smiled into the mirror, and brushed my hair. In the living room my father sat reading the paper. He folded it shut, set it down on his lap.

"Good morning," he said.

I looked at him emptily, my mouth open. I could not say good morning. It was only words, an expression that meant nothing, but I could not say it.

"Sleep okay?" he said.

I wanted to tell him I understood that he was trying. I wanted to thank him for trying to help. Thanks but it was no use.

I wandered into the kitchen. He followed me. I sat at the table. My mother kissed me on my cheek. She poured me a glass of orange juice.

"Some breakfast?" my mother asked. "Eggs? Cereal?"

I stared at my juice. I didn't remember eating. I hadn't eaten supper last night. My stomach was gnawing at me, but I felt like I should throw up.

My father sat opposite me with his coffee and resumed reading the paper.

"You could have gone to work," I said.

He folded his paper and laid it on the table.

My father was a handsome man with shiny black hair neatly combed, a gentle round face, soft eyes, pudgy lips, and the beginnings of a double chin. He didn't look like an accountant. More like an important official. A judge maybe. Or president of some company. He was struggling with what to say.

"I wanted to be here with you," he said at last.

"It's tax time," I said. "I'm sure you're busy."

He nodded and smiled. "Busy all right," he said. "Only two things sure in life—Taxes and..."

He cut himself off. He fought desperately to withdraw the words, to make them go away, to think of something else to say that would somehow retract them.

"Well, at least it's a beautiful day," my mother chimed in cheerfully. "As beautiful as the day you were born. Now, sweetie, try to eat a little breakfast. You're going to need your strength."

My mother set a plate of scrambled eggs and toast in front of me. Then a glass of milk. The steam rose off the eggs. The eggs and toast appeared different to me, as though I'd never seen them before. There was a sweet misery to them. A sadness. I touched the eggs with a finger. Felt the heat. The texture of scrambled eggs. Still wet, the way my mother made them. I wanted to be friends with the eggs and toast. How could I eat them? I yearned for a way to share their sadness.

"Come on sweetie, you have to eat something."

My mother was sitting now too. The two of them with their coffees but no food sat expectantly, observing me as though I were a child about to take my first step, to utter my first word.

Slowly I buttered my toast and took a bite. It tasted like toast. I ate some eggs. They weren't my friends. Were nothing but eggs.

In a few minutes I had eaten it all.

My mother was pleased. She smiled and took away the empty plate.

I left my parents sitting at the kitchen table sipping their coffee.

I showered, packed two suitcases, and walked as quietly as I could through the living room and out the front door. My parents were still in the kitchen talking. I put the suitcases in the trunk of the Nova and came back into the house. I went into the kitchen and my parents stopped talking.

"I'm going out for a while," I said. "Okay if I take the Nova?"

"Sure, sweetie. Some air will do you good."

I wrapped my arms around my father and kissed him on the cheek. Then my mother. I told them I loved them.

"Are you okay?" my mother asked, her hands on my face. "You want to talk about it?"

"I'm fine. Nothing to talk about."

"You planning to go see Mr. and Mrs. Corsen? We could go with you if you'd like."

I took her hands off of my face and walked away from them. I got into my mother's car and drove.

I stole my mother's car. A pale blue Chevy Nova. A plain car. Nothing special. But it was my mother's car, which she needed to drive to work, to run errands, to buy groceries.

She'd just have to buy another one. I hated to do this to her, but I couldn't think of any other way.

I drove through town. To see it one more time. To say goodbye. I drove past Hillview Pharmacy. Closed. A handwritten sign on a piece of cardboard taped to the front door. The Easter display still in the front window. A huge yellow bunny with straw baskets of eggs. Pale blues, pinks, and yellows. Boxes of candy laid out like playing cards. Crepe papers streamers.

Past the three churches. Daffodils sprouting. Crocuses and Hyacinths in bloom. In the front yard of the Methodist Church a magnolia tree like a hundred little arms each holding a fine china teacup.

Then out to the state route. Back past my house.

I remembered what I would come to if I stayed on this road, so I made the first right and drove up a side road. Turned. Turned again. Got lost. Wandered. Drove. Thought I recognized a road. Turned onto it. Drove some more.

For a while I cried, but then it stopped.

I found myself winding up the mountain. Into the state gamelands. Along the ridge. Overlooking the valley, the tinted tops of the red maples streaking across it.

I came to the end of the road and got out of the car. I followed the path to the waterfall. I got down on my hands and knees, closed my eyes, and crawled towards it.

All I had to do was keep my eyes closed and keep crawling forward until he told me to open them. What could be simpler?

I put one hand out. Felt the dirt. Then the other. One knee. The other.

Then when I put my hand forward I felt the rock. I crawled forward until I felt the rock under both hands. Then both knees.

I was close. A couple steps more. Was that what you called them? Steps? When I was crawling? I wanted to ask Harry. Ask him what they were called. He would fix his sights on me, feigning exasperation at my silliness, and I'd make a face right back at him, and he'd tickle me.

I wanted to feel him tickle me. Feel his hands on my tummy, on my sides. Tickle me and then touch me.

I felt my hands on the rock, felt it hard, hurting my knees. My right hand went forward and when I went to set it down, there was nothing there. No rock. Only air.

Now what? How did I do this? My right hand had only air and if I lifted my left I would fall onto my face. Was I supposed to lift them both, inch forward on my knees, and just keep going?

"Harry, what do I do?" I said out loud.

Startled by the sound of my voice, I opened my eyes. I was inches from going over. I eased myself down onto my stomach and stared down over the edge. Water shot out of the side of the mountain, out of the wall of rock, falling, breaking into a thousand splinters, hitting, breaking more, cascading, and floating away.

"God I miss you," I said. "It is only a day and I miss you more than all of the things I have ever missed in all my life put together. Harry, damn you. I can't stand this. I miss you. I miss you. I miss you."

I wanted to take off my clothes and lie on my back on this rock and have him on top of me.

I stood on the stone and leaned forward, peering down to the waterfall and the pool.

God, it was so beautiful. I wished I knew how to die. A way to die without having to kill myself. Simply close my eyes and have it over

without having to do anything, not even make a firm decision, just be done with it, with everything.

“We didn’t even get a last goodbye, damn it. Nothing. This is no way for things to end. No last time to feel you against me. On me. In me.”

I pulled my sweater over my head and dropped it onto the ground. Pushed off my shoes. Unsnapped my jeans. Pulled them down and shimmied out of them. Kicked them away. I stood naked on the rock. It was a fine April day, sunny, and fresh, but still brisk and as I ran my hands up over myself, I felt the hardness of my nipples.

My hands. My hands on me, instead of him.

I lay myself onto the rock. The stone was cold and hard against my skin. I let my head down, my hair against the rock.

I extended my arms. I spread my legs.

I closed my eyes and imagined him tickling me. I tried to tickle myself. It felt like nothing.

Damn you Harry. How could you do this?

I touched myself with a finger, starting at my neck, my chest, my belly. It was his finger. I could see him. I knew exactly how he would do it.

I opened my mouth as if he were kissing me.

I started to cry.

I cried and touched myself and forced myself to continue and when I stopped I sat up and with my arms crossed I cried and rocked, and knew I would not die, could not do it, and there was nothing to do but wait for time.

I dressed and returned to the car. I drove away from Hillsvie with no destination in mind, only the goal of creating distance, so time might have a chance to heal me.

By mid-afternoon, I needed to find a toilet and I was hungry. It seemed that the more distance I put between Hillsvie and me, the more my appetite returned. The next town I came to was Amton, a community that in every respect but its name might have been Hillsvie. Pretty houses on the outskirts gave way to three churches, a high school, and a firehouse, and then a sturdy downtown section of squat brick buildings on one side of Main Street and frame buildings on the other—a hardware store, a restaurant, a bank, and a pharmacy. It had enough traffic lights and commerce to be a town, but not enough to be a city. It was a place old enough to have roots and tired enough to be well past its prime, a place folks would be proud to be from and even prouder to be away from.

I parked the Nova on Main Street, put a nickel in the meter, and walked down the block to the Farley Restaurant. After a lunch of a grilled cheese sandwich and potato chips, I headed back to the car, which was parked in front of the Amton Pharmacy. In the window was a clutter of home healthcare equipment—bedpans and pale lifeless plastic orthopedic devices—pathetically sad arms and legs, hung forlornly from the stainless steel supports of immobile walkers.

Mrs. Corsen sure could have taught them a thing or two about window displays.

A sheet of paper taped to the window caught my eye.

Apartment for rent. Clean. Convenient. Economical. By the week or month. Enquire within.

Inside, the pharmacy was a lot like Hillsvie's—a worn wooden floor, old shelves, that smell of talcum powder. But whereas Barney Corsen's store maintained an air of dignity, this place had the early

signs of decline, of having begun a long slide into decay. The stock on the shelves was spotty, dusty, and uneven. The light in the Timex watch display had gone out, and the unit no longer rotated. A delivery carton from a wholesaler sat in the middle of the floor, unattended.

The store was empty except for a man with a narrow, pockmarked face and thin, colorless hair, combed straight back. He was stationed behind the prescription counter in the rear.

“Yes, young lady, what can I do for you?” he asked.

His eyes narrowed behind his steel-rimmed glasses. He seemed to be making a judgement about whether I was fit to be in his store.

“Come on now, I ain’t got all day.”

I turned to leave.

“Now young lady, you came in here for something. S’pose you come on back here and tell Doc Walden what it is and see if we can help you out.”

I opened the door.

“You know, there ain’t no point in running away from your problems, whatever they are, they ain’t going to get no better unless you face up and take your medicine.”

When I turned around, he was smiling at me.

“And it’s a fortunate thing too or I’d be out of business faster than you can say castor oil.”

He came out from behind the counter and walked up to the front of the store. There was a short counter with newspapers stacked on one side and cigarettes behind it. He opened a canister of pretzel rods, pulled out two, bit into one, and extended the other to me. I took it.

He was inspecting me top to bottom.

"If you have a prescription, I'd be glad to take a peek at it. You been over to see Doc Stollermire?"

Behind him, the cigarette display was a mess, packs hanging out of half-opened cartons, many of the slots empty.

"I saw the sign about the apartment," I said.

He took another bite out of his pretzel rod.

"You in the market for an apartment are you?"

He popped the last of the pretzel into his mouth.

"Of course, I would need to see it first."

"Of course. Now where did you say were from?"

I bit into my pretzel and stood there chewing, staring back at him.

"Well now young lady, perhaps you ought to say right now. If I'm going to be renting out an apartment, I think I'm entitled to know who I'm renting to."

"Virginia Bradsten."

"You aren't in some kind of trouble are you?"

I took another bite of pretzel and chewed on it.

"Yeah, well, I guess that's okay. I reckon we all are in some kind of trouble. How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

He pursed his lips and thought about it. He had huge pores in his nose, craters in his face, and red blotches.

"You ain't in no trouble with the law, are you? No bloodhounds on your trail? No posse about to ride into town after you? No posters down at the post office with your picture on it?"

"I haven't been to the post office."

"Well hell, I guess it don't matter anyway. We could use some excitement around here."

He took me out onto the sidewalk, gave me directions, and handed me a key.

“It ain’t much and it could certainly use a woman’s touch. But it’s warm and dry, and everything works, and if it’s the sort of thing you’re looking for, well, you can see for yourself, I reckon, as well as I can tell it.”

I walked around the corner, along the side of the building, and into the alley. The back door was open, and I went in and up the stairs. They were cold and empty. At the top of the stairs, there were two doors. He hadn’t said anything about there being two doors. One had a glass top half and E. J. Curren, Attorney at Law stenciled on it, and the other was plain gray wood. I chose the plain door.

The apartment smelled musty and of gas. The furniture in the living room was old and sagging. The countertops in the kitchen, the stove, and the table were sticky with grease. The sink in the bathroom dripped and there was a brown stain in the tub. The toilet was rimmed in greenish brown. There were two small bedrooms.

I sat on the couch in the living room, the dust moats rising around me. I wanted to cry and feel sorry for myself.

But if I was to cry, I had to go home. If I was to stay here, I must not cry. And I could not go home now. Harry was there.

I must start anew. I must start somewhere.

I went back to the store and waited while the pharmacist took care of a couple of customers.

“Okay, young lady, what’d you think of my apartment?”

“How much?”

“One sixty-five a month. Includes water and lights. Gas is extra. I’d need first month and one month’s security.”

I didn't know what I'd expected, but hearing the numbers snapped me back to reality.

"Now, young lady, why the glum face? Let's take things one at a time. Do you like the apartment?"

"Yes."

"Okay now. If money's a problem, perhaps we can work something out."

He took me back behind the counter and made me some tea and we struck a deal. I would take the apartment. No lease. Month-to-month. No security. Rent one-fifty a month. In return, I'd scour the place and keep it clean. He'd supply the paint and I'd paint it. And I'd work in the pharmacy. Answer the phone, tend the counter up front, run deliveries, sweep the floor, do whatever needed doing.

He put out his hand and I shook it. It was bony but kind. ▣